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From Visibility to Analysis: Gender and History

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Abstract

The chapter describes the process by which European history writing has been changed due to the appearance of compensatory women's history writing as to well as the epistemological criticism gender imposes on history writing.

A tanulmány bemutatja, hogy az európai történetírás hogyan változott a kompenzációs iskola és a társadalmi nemek jelentette episztemológiai kihívás miatt.

Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* wrote that history was boring and uninspiring because it was all about "(t)he quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any woman at all". Her words read as a prelude to two centuries of writers arguing that history as it had been written by men was incomplete[1]. In this chapter I would like to give a brief overview to prove that the change advocated by Austen – to include women, to make women visible in history – was only the first step towards making history inspiring: it can never be "complete". I would like to investigate how using gender as an analytical category of history moved historical narrative from compensatory history writing based on essentialized differences to epistemological questioning of these facts about "popes and kings, with wars". I do not in this chapter want to present the development of gender history as a linear progression. It is, rather, a complex interrelated matrix of academic inquiry and social movements which in different European countries under the overarching frame of modernity developed in differing ways depending on the different intellectual traditions. I am planning to explore a European intellectual road map of terminologies, a historical perspective giving examples of how gender became a category of analysis and what the limits to using it are. Here I have to be simplistic because of length restrictions, so I will limit myself to using major historical works to signpost different approaches to gender.

Historical canon and difference

If we define history as a site of remembrance, it is crucial to see it also as a reflection on power relations: who is remembering what, who is mastering the past and the remembrance of it, what is becoming visible in such a historical canon?

The development of history writing from the ancient masters onward defined events and canonized stories as important, visible for future generations. These stories became canonised "History" by the 19th century. History was defined as the science of the past of the state, which amounts to thematising the past of the nation as a descriptive and cognitive science. In this context there was the belief that description is possible, the world is cognitively understandable. And for a long

time it was not considered problematic that half of the population, namely women, were excluded from this process.

Bonnie Smith in her book on *Gender of History* describes the process by which 19th-century history writing started to copy the rules and regulations of philology: a discipline which was institutionalized and generally acknowledged as a legitimate science[2]. The task of historians became that of writing real, objective history, and in order to do that they set up an apparatus, such as footnotes, and institutions, such as textbooks and monographs.

Ranke defined history as one of the empirical sciences: it deals with collecting, recovering facts. During the self-definition process of history, narratives about events in the past were divided into important and less important facts[3]. Women were not the only group excluded. Other excluded subjects of historical inquiry were those who had no relationship to the state or its institutions, who produced no documents about themselves as sources of history. As a result of this selection process less important events such as the history of everyday life, history of entertainment, history of working class and colonialized people – or to put it bluntly, everything related to women – were labelled as unimportant.

From the 19th century observation became the historical research method, borrowed from the natural sciences which staked a claim to normative monopoly in science. As Carlo Ginzburg asked, what are the consequences for history writing if there is the same logic of selecting and interpreting facts as a detective uses?[4] History then becomes a story of 'what really happened'; there is one privileged interpreter of past clues buried in the narrative, and that is the historian. At which point the participation or rather non-participation of women in history, in past events, became a tool for maintaining patriarchy.

The institutionalization of history writing ran parallel with the development of modern nation-states. During this process close institutional, personal, professional and emotional links were established. While underlining their objectivity and professionalism, historians defined what the nation is (or rather should be) as the only framework for writing history, while in return they were guaranteed a monopoly on the educational system and on the institutions for teaching the craftsman-ship of history at universities, namely departments of history.

By the end of the 19th century the educational system, by now affecting all strata of the population, had reached the point of producing history textbooks where women were not mentioned. If they were mentioned, women formed a part of the narrative of how the nation was born and survived its struggles; they were seen as mothers and heroic wives. Their task was to mirror the achievements of great men[5]. History at this point meant political history, which celebrated the nation and its founders from the perspective of the nation-state in Europe.

The beginnings: the issue of visibility

Against this traditional approach to our 'past', two types of resistance were developing: one which was a movement and the other which came from the institutional side in the form of scholarship. This division is somewhat artificial, but serves the cognitive purpose of the chapter as to how science and social movements develop in interaction with each other to foster change in history writing and in defining what history is.

The resistance driven by a movement started with the collection of women's texts where female authors spoke about their understanding of history[6]. The most important document of the modern women's movement mentioned among other things that historical counter-facts are needed to contrast the dominant brand of history writing. This was believed to be a solution for the political

and intellectual dilemma of that time. In the collection edited by Tjitske Akkerman and Siep Stuurman the authors introduce "six waves" of European feminism from late medieval times to the present, viewing the equality of women as an integral part of European modernity[7].

The institutional or scientific resistance is connected to historians who began questioning the omission of women as scientific subjects of historical inquiry: *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* was the title of the path-breaking book edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz in 1987. It is a collection of articles by pioneers in the making of women's history defining European context according to the criteria of the Cold War[8].

The early emancipation movements already recognized that historical memory is an important element of the formation of women's identity. They declared from London to Budapest that if women get to know their "own" history, they will be able to open up new political perspectives; they will get a new kind of knowledge. The creation of a history of their own – like a "room of her own", to paraphrase Virginia Woolf – was crucial for creating identity politics: establishing "women" as subjects of inquiry[9]. This was the aim: to make women visible, to recover the previously hidden truth and facts about women's lives. This was the first phase in reforming history writing, bringing in the history of previously marginalized groups. There were books to be written on queens and prostitutes; these became the forerunners of the historical school, the "herstory" approach which aims at naïvely compensating for grievances that women had suffered at the hands of men.

Problematising women historically starts with defining "woman" and stretches all the way to historicizing gender[10] and nowadays to analysing intersections of gender with class, race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality.

History has a gender, a dominant masculine gender, and its importance was based on exclusion: excluding women, labourers, gypsies. On the long road from compensatory history writing to questioning the epistemology of history writing, the task for gender historians is not to create a taxonomy of excluded groups, because then we end up, as Butler said, as one of the etceteras[11]. It is more important to understand the power relations working behind the mechanisms that created historical exclusion practices, and to investigate how different normative concepts such as "man" and "woman" have changed historically.

Historians who aimed to revise history had to face the problem that women did not leave sources behind describing their activity. Women's history therefore posits women at the centre of analysis, and looks at their roles in social and political movements. That definition sheds light on the double problem of knowledge produced about women in a historical perspective. On the one hand, it was a long political fight to make the knowledge produced about women acceptable, valid and legitimate because, as one of the results of the 1968 new social movements, a new sensibility about difference was constructed. On the other hand, a body of knowledge needed to be produced questioning history writing as a positivist epistemological subject. According to Jacques Revel, the history of sexual roles changes the methods of history itself, integrating methods from sociology and anthropology[12]. On the other hand, as he also pointed out, recovery of the world in the lost world reproduced the lost world. So it is true that historical analysis of sexual roles became an acceptable historical topic but the manner of its birth, its close relationship to activism and its interdisciplinarity influenced the fate of that new-born. This approach was/is imprisoned in the historicizing of essentialized biological difference: producing works in line with the functions of the female body: birth, menstruation, breast-feeding.

The other approach in women's history writing consists of looking at the roles women played in society as domestic servants, witches, nuns or queens, confirming biological differences. These oc-

cupied the proper place for women, i.e. they became visible as they occupied positions that were acceptable for women. Women could be made visible where they were already present; that is the vicious circle of this approach. With this woman's history excluded itself once again from "*the* History" which is the history of power: political history.

Works on the lives of famous women, histories of women's education, women's employment, the family, or reproduction do not necessarily question the framework of knowledge, no matter how much women occupy the focus. This compensatory approach is still present, creating a considerable amount of knowledge about women which is at least a first necessary step on the road to making women visible.

As far as any fruitful interaction is concerned between the resistance of the movement and academic resistance to excluding women from science both as agents and as subjects, the first wave of feminism gained the right to vote for women in most European countries after World War I, and the second wave of the 1960s was thus able to build upon these achievements. Making women visible and objects of a legitimate scientific inquiry was on the banners of the second-wave feminists and they used it in their battle to institutionalize women's studies. Women's studies as a discipline became an institution: its practitioners taught and researched women's pasts. Parallel with these developments, history departments also felt the pressure to include women: hiring a woman to be the women's historian, creating a space for a person who is working on "women". The history of women by now reaches into all fields of history writing: politics, culture, theory, religion and economics, and is a field of its own.

Gender as a category of analysis

The achievements of "herstory" and integrating women into social history led to the institutionalization of women's studies but it left "history" as a science untouched by reconsideration.

The "add women (to history) and do not stir" approach was questioned in its essence when gender became an analytical category and a separate field of history writing at the same time. Women's history, as I have argued, always developed in relation to and in partnership with political movements emancipating women, providing intellectual ammunition in this struggle. Like labour history which worked in alliance with the labour movement, or oral history seen as a new way of using sources to create historical narratives. The method shifted from observation to participation.

One of the methodological innovations which helped women's history to meet the epistemological challenge is oral history. Oral history is both a critical method and a genre of inquiry; as such, it provides the perfect methodology for a new approach to our past. The genre and methods of oral history were born back in the 1960s in the framework of an elitist consciousness that posited a need for implementing change in a top-down way[13]. A methodological approach that defines the difference between narrated self and narrating self is a substantial step towards opening up new room for interpretation. Understanding the multiplicity of truth is a way of questioning power relations; doing oral history, interviewing women about their pasts and analysing their narratives contributed to the reconceptualisation of what history is.

Gender is the term which was first used by American scholars underlining the social characteristics of discrimination. Joan Kelly pointed out that gender is as basic a category of analysis as race and class.

There is the general belief in the mainstream context that since women's history is different from men's history it had better be written by women only. But we can also raise the question, as Fukuyama asked in his article in *Foreign Affairs*: what would happen if women ruled the world? Would

it be more peaceful?[14] Is there such a thing as women's history or men's history? Gender as a category of analysis can help us to answer this question and face up to our romantic illusions. As Natalie Zemon Davis writes:

> Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order and promote its change[15].

Joan Wallach Scott gave a lecture in 1986 about gender, and the journal "Gender and History" (1989) by its very title indicated that a new school was born, adding the slogan: "women's history writing does not concern half but the whole population"[16]. Scott pointed out that there is a burning need for a theoretical frame, otherwise the professional level and professionally acknowledged prestige do not meet. Gender as a category is used in two ways: as a descriptive category (mapping those territories where structures and ideologies meet) and as an explanatory category, which according to Scott has three different frameworks. The first of these is the feminist framework, which explains the difference from patriarchy. She points out its a-historical character since this standpoint says nothing else than that the gender system stands above all other social systems. The second explanatory framework is the Marxist one, where gender is only considered as a function of changing economic structures. The third one is French post-structuralism where the phallus is the only signifier[17].

Gender is a meta-concept, reflexive, itself a subject of analysis as is necessary in order to know how change happens and how gender identities are constructed. It helped to move scholarship from a compensatory approach to an epistemological critique. The main message is that "man" and "woman" are empty categories, they do not have a meaning of their own, but at the same time they are overburdened because they have different and ever-changing meanings. Hence the aim is to create new knowledge beyond these dichotomies[18]. Gender is often simply used as a synonym for women, whereas it should bring into focus how different social forms constructing differences work, and what their relationship to power is.

Of course, that is not an unproblematic process. There are many debates being waged among historians but I would like to address one which fits into the frame of this chapter: understanding the complex relationship between women's history and gender history. Women's historians are blaming gender historians for emptying out the political zeal by using gender. For their part, gender historians are blaming women's historians for being descriptive, under-theorized and essentialist. However, answering the very simple question – 'where were the women? – will give work for several generations of women's historians and topics for PhD dissertations for long decades to come.

The discussion between June Purvis and Penelope Corfield sheds light on some aspects of the debate about gender vs. women's history. Penelope Corfield hailed gender history as an opening up of women's history towards history, while June Purvis insisted that it diminished the importance of women's social movements as its roots. The debate in the journal "Rethinking History" sheds light on the main issue: to define if there is such a thing as "historical facts" independent from an epistemic community. Corfield apparently believed in the existence of "History" which flows regardless of and untouched by women's actions and their emancipation battles[19]. This is a very specific debate referring to issues in the European context.

By the 1990s in Europe several gender studies programmes had been founded which in their analytical claim moved beyond "woman" as the target of historical description. It was widely accepted that the social agent is gendered and gender is acted out and "performed" on the individual level[20]. It is a

pressing intellectual and political necessity for the analysis now to take into consideration the intersection of social differences such as race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion together with gender.

European contexts

CLIOHRES, publisher of this volume, is a European network of historians so that the "European context" as such needs to be problematised. The first problem is how gender is translated in the different European languages[21]. Michélle Perrot, the well-known French historian in the "Clio" journal of women's history, only uses women's history as a concept, not gender history and that already indicates a European – meaning non-English – approach to differences. In each country the development of writing gender history is deeply connected to national historiography and the characteristics of historians as an institutionalized profession. The bias towards gender or towards women's history depends on the local intellectual tradition regarding difference.

The second issue is the challenge of how to overcome the national frame of history writing. In 1987 the *International Federation for Research on Women's History* (IFRWH) was founded. By now every European country is a member mirroring the national division of history writing. Hence the challenge of the moment for European historians is how to get beyond those divisions[22].

The other issue which is important is the relationship of women's history and women's movements and their relationship to implementation of the European leftist project. Akkerman and Stuurman warned against "*a priori* reducing feminism to a belated effect of Enlightment egalitarianism"[23]. Unless we follow this suggestion, we exclude the possibility of creating powerful alliances with those streams of feminist thought which are based not on equality but on difference. That approach offers a chance to reconceptualise for example the social work or resistance movements based on the politics of motherhood as possible alliance for feminists[24].

The impact of post-structuralism on history writing is very limited: it seems to be a non-travelling concept, in Europe in general and in countries of the former Soviet Bloc in particular. Post-structuralism is essential for understanding the multiplicity of truths and the constructions of truths. The lack of knowledge of post-structuralism in Europe today is explained by Rosi Braidotti as having been caused by two factors: an unfair reception of poststructuralist French philosophers in the English-speaking world, and historical amnesia about movements of thoughts and ideas during the Cold War[25]. Thinking about inequalities in relation to differences was a part of the European leftist project which suffered a major blow during World War II. This was the time when the concept of difference was colonized by the first attempt of the Nazis to create *Festung Europa,* and also by the Soviet empire, which adopted this way of thinking about difference in a normative way, applying it to "class enemies".

After 1989 with the end of the Cold War and the quasi-pluralisation of the intellectual arena, leftist materialist thinking was deeply discredited because of the different practices of the statist feminist regimes in the former Soviet Bloc[26]. Victorious global neo-liberalism appeared as the only alternative after 1989 and, together with the non-intended consequence of the EU forming as a new supranational unit, caused the revival of neo-communitarianism and identity politics all over Europe. Gender as a category arrived in the countries of the former Communist bloc with a wrong passport[27]. It questioned all those 'sacred cows' that the countries regaining their independence after decades of communism wanted: a national frame of conceptualization and collective victimhood during communism. Besides, critical thinkers could feel the 'imperialism' of Western

feminists. Again what was forgotten or rarely spoken about was the critical intellectual leftist project: the project which in past decades had created a space for thinking about our common past as a construction, as well as the 'differences' I pointed out before. We can only hope that future generations will be able to fill such spaces and build on them, if they are up to it.

Notes

1 J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Hammondsworth 1985, p. 123.

2 B. Smith, *The Gender of History. Men, Women and Historical Practices*. Cambridge 1998, p. 135.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

4 C. Ginzburg, *Moretti, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method*, in T. Bennett, (ed.) *Popular Fiction*, London 1990, pp. 252-276.

5 G. Pomata, *History, Particular and Universal: Some Recent Women's History Textbooks*, in "Feminist Studies", 1993, 1, pp. 7-50.

6 S. Groag Bell, K.M. Offen (eds.), *Women, the Family, and Freedom: the Debate in Documents*, Stanford 1984; K.M. Offen, *European Feminisms*, 1700-1950*: a Political History*, Stanford 2000; L. DiCaprio, M.E. Wiesner, (eds.) *Lives and voices: sources in European women's history*, Boston 2000

7 T. Akkerman, S. Stuurman, *Introdution: Feminism in European History* in *Perspectives on Feminist Thought in European History from the Middle Ages to the Present*, London 1998, pp. 1-34.

8 C. Koonz, C. Bridenthal, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Boston 1987. The third edition was published in 1998 edited by Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Wiesner.

9 V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London 1994; B.S. Anderson, J.P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present,* London 1990.

10 D. Riley, *Does Sex have a History?*, in J. Scott (ed.), *Feminism and History*, Oxford - New York 1996, pp. 17-34.

11 J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1990.

12 J. Revel, *Masculine and Feminine: the Historiographical Use of Sexual Roles*, in M. Perrot (ed.), *Writing Women's History*, Oxford 1992, pp. 90-105.

13 J. Sangster, *Telling our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History*, in R. Perks, A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader,* New York 1998, pp. 87-100.

14 F. Fukuyama, *Women and the Evolution of World Politics*, in "Foreign Affaires", 1998, 10-11, pp. 24-40.

15 N.Z. Davis, *"Women's History" in Transition: The European Case*, in Scott J. (ed.), *Feminism and History*, Oxford - New York, 1996, p. 88.

16 "Gender and History", 1989, 1, p. 7.

17 J.W. Scott, *Women's History in New Perspectives*, in P. Burke (ed.), *Historical Writing*, London 1991, pp. 42-66. For more on this see J.W. Scott, *Gender: A useful category of historical analysis*, in "American Historical Review", 1986, 91, pp. 1053-1075, and reconsiderations in J.W. Scott, *Millenial Fantasies. The Future of "Gender" in the 21st Century*, in H. Claudia, A. Caroline (eds.), *Gender, die Tücken einer Kategorie. Joan W. Scott Geschichte und Politik. Beiträge zum Symposion anlässlich der Verleihung des Hans-Sigrist-Preises 1999 der Universität Bern an Joan W. Scott*, Zürich 2001, pp. 19-37.

18 See G. Fraisse, M. Perrot, (eds.), *A History of Women in the West*, 1-5, 1993; A.K. Isaacs (ed.), *Political Systems and Definitions of Gender Roles*, Pisa 2001.

19 P.J. Corfield, *History and the Challenge of Gender History*, in "Rethinking History", 1997, 3, pp. 241-258; J. Purvis, A. Weatherill, *Playing the Gender History Game: a Reply to Penelope J. Corfield*, in "Rethinking History", 1999, 3, pp. 333-338; P.J. Corfield, *From Women's History to Gender History: A Reply to "Playing The Gender History Game"*, in "Rethinking History", 1999, 3, pp. 339-341.

20 J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1990.

21 Dossier of *The Making of the European Women's Studies*, vols. 1-7. University of Utrecht, 1999-2008, gives an overview how gender is translated to the different languages.

22 See the overview K. Offen, R. Pierson, J. Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, Bloomington 1991.

23 Akkerman, Stuurman, *Introduction* cit., p. 2.

[24] A. Pető, *Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective*, in H. Kahlert, E. Ernst (eds.), *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe: Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations*, Berlin 2010, pp. 189-201.

[25] R. Braidotti, *Identity, Subjectivity and Difference: a Critical Genealogy*, in G. Griffin, R. Braidotti (eds.), *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*, London - New York 2002, pp. 158-183; R. Braidotti, *The Uses and Abuses of the Sex/Gender Distinction in European Feminist Practices*, in Griffin, Braidotti, *Thinking Differently:* cit., pp. 285-307.

[26] A. Pető, *Writing Women's History in Eastern Europe. Toward a 'Terra Cognita'?*, in "Journal of Women's History", 2004, 4, pp. 173-183.

[27] J. Smejkalova, *On the Road: Smuggling Feminism Across the Post-Iron Curtain*, in "Replika", 1996, 1, pp. 97-102.

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